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Working time regimes: A panel discussion on continuing problems

Jana Costas, Susanne Ekman, Laura Empson, Dan Kärreman and Sara Louise Muhr

Abstract: This article records a panel discussion at the Organizational Working Time Regimes conference on 31 March 2017 at the University of Graz, Austria. The discussion was moderated by Sara Louise Muhr and the panelists were Jana Costas, Susanne Ekman, Laura Empüson and Dan Kärreman (in alphabetic order). The discussion both departed from yet centered on the concept of time itself: how we understand time as academics, employees and managers and how the notion of time guides and controls all of us in various ways. Through the very different perspectives that the panelists have on time and work regimes, it became evident that time – and discussions of time – is complex and context dependent and needs to be researched as such. The discussion passionately weaved in and out of key questions on work intensification, inequality regimes and resistance to working time regimes that are deeply entwined in dynamic dialectics such as personal/professional, past/future, individual/organizational, worker/leader, good/bad. The panel in this way takes the reader through some difficult discussions about what is "extreme", for whom is it extreme and what interventions (if any) can be made by academics. In so doing, the panelists sensitively drew attention to our own line of work, academia, and the work regimes controlling academics.

Keywords: working times, overwork, work intensification, professional service firms, work-life balance

Sara Louise Muhr: Welcome to this panel session. We have four panelists and I'm very happy that you all agreed to be here today. You were chosen because each one of you make very sharp and sometimes provocative statements and I really like that about you. I'll start by introducing our panelists: first we have Jana Costas, who is a Professor at Europa-Universität Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder). Then we have Laura Empson, who is a Professor at Cass Business School, University of London, as well as the director of Cass Centre for Professional Service Firms. Laura also used to sit on the board of KPMG and has been in investment banking herself as well and a strategy consultant. Then we have Susanne Ekman, who is Associate Professor at Roskilde University at the Department of People and Technology in Denmark. And last but not least Professor Dan Kärreman from Copenhagen Business School, Department of Management, Society and Communication. I would like to start by asking 'what at this conference has so far been your key takeaway?' Let's start with Jana.

Jana Costas: First of all, time in itself. That time is something that runs through many things. Time is a very complex phenomenon and just focusing on time in itself is not enough to understand the significance of it. Another thing I thought was very interesting is the range of how extreme time has been interpreted. But maybe we have focused too much on the phenomenon of too long working hours, which assumes a clock time understanding. I for example talked to Monika Müller about her work on night time. Here it's not about too long working hours but it's the time in which they work that plays a role. So, I think we should look at time not just in terms of clock time. And the last thing that I thought was interesting across the presentations is that we all tend to start by 'oh time has changed' or 'we are now living in times of the this and that'. But I think we have to be very careful about statements that imply that today things are necessarily entirely new and different. Maybe it is a return to how Edward P. Thompson described it in the era before industrialization, namely one where the boundaries between work and non-work were blurred.

Laura Empson: OK, I will take a step back and try and do a little bit of ethnographic reflection, because one thing that struck me was the nature of the community here which I thought was

simultaneously supportive and challenging, and that's quite rare to find. This conference had real soul and I think it comes back to what it is that draws us to studying this phenomenon [overwork; SLM]. At some level we actually really care. I sensed that we really care about the damage that this phenomenon is doing to people and one of the reasons that we really care is because it is about us personally. So, there were a lot of papers about academic overwork. I think our best research comes from deep inside us and when we're trying to address and make sense of our own issues by studying other people's issues, we just do better research.

So, my point really is an encouragement and a reminder. Although people throughout the conference have been talking about multiple levels of analysis, people kept forgetting the individual. You kept talking about the individual as the person who is the outcome of the situation – you were using individual as a unit of analysis but explaining the phenomenon by looking at organizational and societal issues and never really digging down deep into why the individual is so susceptible to these organizational and societal issues. I think that's inevitable amongst a group of sociologists. You're always going to have that vulnerability. But I think this is an issue where you cannot ignore the individual, both as a cause and as a consequence. So, I would really like to encourage you to keep thinking about your research subjects' life before they begin work. What happened before the person turned up at the office. So, some colleagues and I have a paper just coming out in *Human Relations* [the journal; SLM] on anticipatory socialization. We're going right back to people's early childhood experiences as explanations for why they are responding to the working environment in a particular way and I think scholars need to keep that in mind and keep doing that. I think we owe it to the subjects we're studying precisely because they don't have time for reflexivity. We can't take at face value the explanations they are giving us for their behaviours. Most of them haven't been in therapy, they haven't really thought about these kind of issues until they experience some kind of collapse, so it's all the more important that we try do some extra thinking for them, not just from a critical perspective, not from a sneering perspective but from a position of compassion as well, and I think if we do that the quality of our research will get even better.

Susanne Ekman: One of the things that I noticed in Judy's lecture [see the essay by Judy Wajcman in this issue, SLM] was that we need to be careful not to universalize our theories about time and acceleration. I think we have to be very careful to develop contextually sensitive

theories about what extreme work means. I can think of at least four different kinds of extreme work regimes: 1) a blue collar extreme work regime such as extreme night shifts, 2) a blue collar extreme work regime with casual labor that makes people take 3, 4, 5 jobs at a time, 3) in so-called welfare societies, such as Denmark, we have extreme work in our welfare professions. It's not necessarily long working hours, but it is very specific kind of work intensification which is a product of the public version of neoliberalism that we have witnessed over the years. So, I think looking at the way that professionalism changes in welfare institutions is very important, 4) then there is the so-called knowledge work. But we cannot generalize the kind of extreme work that happens in knowledge work. Today, we have heard a lot about professional service firms, and I noticed that they are extremely motivated by for example money and status. That is one set of drivers. I have studied creative work, and they could not care less about money. So, there are different kinds of drivers of extreme work in knowledge work. Even though they both feature internal competition, there are completely different drivers for this internal competition. I just want to remind us all how contextual this issue is; not just in terms of profession, but also in terms of nationality and different laws etc.

Another point is that we have to remind ourselves of the ambiguous nature of these phenomena. In the professions that I have looked at, even though there is massive exploitation going on by way of work intensification, many of these people wouldn't want a different kind of job. They enjoy the form that this exploitation takes. So, I think we have to be wary of the purely critical narratives and see the complexities of these phenomena. That leads me to my next point which is that we have to study the inequality in this acceleration/intensification regime, because in the area that I'm studying I see an extreme polarization in terms of who are able to benefit from these regimes and who end up losing. We are so seduced by win-win scenarios. Basically, the neoliberal public management regime is a win-win fantasy. But it has a tendency to create a smaller group of people who can reap all the benefits, because a larger group is increasingly left as a lose-lose. We should all be very interested in the structural dynamics intensifying inequality in this regime. In other words, the kind of extreme work which some of these blue collar workers experience is also a product of the kind of extreme work that the elite of intense knowledge work is performing.

Dan Kärreman: One thing that struck me is the need for clarification and polarization of this phenomenon. On one hand, there seems to be certain classes of certain forms of work where you have extreme time regimes where work has been intensified. On the other hand, there are other areas where time plays out in a different way, where for example workers want to have more time. We have the emergence of the zero hour contract for example, we have the destabilization of time regimes which doesn't necessarily mean that people work more it can actually also mean that they work less. And this is a bit confusing, I think generally, because we have all sorts of phenomena out there around time, so this kind of standard idea of how we're supposed to work it has been undermined. I now think time regimes operate differently and in different ways. I think Jana commented about that time is not quantity necessarily, it's increasingly becoming a quality. I think we have a tendency to focus on the elite class of workplace, such as professionals and academics. And it's probably because it's close to home. But there is a narcissistic element in why we focus on that so much. I think we should broaden our horizons more and your point Susanne that we are not necessarily engaging enough with people whose jobs are precarious and what happens to how they understand time and how they engage with it is important. And my final reflection and this is going to be a long one is it's really how we still struggle with work life balance.

I think there is something seriously wrong with how we understand work life balance. I think this is probably primarily because for a lot of people work is life. And to talk about work life balance when you get most if not all the identity from work is impossible. When it comes to trying to fix the obvious issues we need to look at the fact that people are basically addicted to work. Susanne, I think you had a very important reflection when you said that people like to be exploited and they like it because this is how they understand themselves. They are also given the possibility to exploit others and exploit organizations. We don't really have an understanding of how that plays out. But I think this is getting worse. For example, think about the notion of career. To introduce the idea that basically as an individual you are engaging in continuous improvement. And I think this is very seductive. I like it myself. This is also how academia works. You have to prove yourself and when you continuously have to prove yourself and then eventually you'll end up being a professor ready to do whatever you want. Or at least it's the fantasy of how this is supposed to work. But the problem with that is you end up in situations where you are always coming out short. That is the point of a career system. Career systems

always emphasize that there is more to do and since it is difficult for us to provide really good evidence for when we are useful we substitute that by basically working more. So, I do recognize that I personally have a positive orientation to the notion of career, but I think it is highly problematic. It might even be a cancer and we need to stop it; take this seriously, how this plays out and how it actually makes sensible work life issues to resolve the problem in one sense almost impossible.

Sara Louise Muhr: I want to pick up on something that Laura said about motivation. So, I want to ask you all what your motivation is for doing work on work time regimes; for doing this kind of research?

Susanne Ekman: Well, my motivation is that I'm deeply fascinated by the spell our society is under – our belief in what I call win-win regimes or alchemistic regimes. Even though we have seen the terrifying consequences of it with the financial crisis, so little has changed. We are willing to repress so much in order to maintain this fantasy. I'm very curious about this individualistic narrative claiming that anything is possible if you just mix the right ingredients. We are all attached to it, and since 1970 we have more or less lost our models for collectivity. So, all struggles are individualized. I know places that are attempting to mobilize a collective struggle, and it is experienced – even by those who are exploited – as a loss of individual right. So, I think that we are facing a very big challenge as society in terms of how we get out of the seduction of the individualized win-win narratives. As long as we are under its spell, we will not be able to mobilize new forms of protection. Yes, I find it extremely fascinating how happily we subject ourselves to this, in many ways, painful and unjust set of dynamics.

Dan Kärreman: The reason I ended up in this, is because I studied consultants in my career and they seem to work crazy hours. They're insane and they also do it with a happy smile and it sort of was a signature for them to stay until nine, 10 or 11 in the evening and then show up at six or seven. And for me that was a phenomenon: what on earth is going on here? And I know for the particular people that I studied – and as Susanne commented before we need to contextualize it –

this was very much how they made a career how they actually became somebody. Thus, not doing this, was basically to stigmatize oneself, so people basically do this to stay afloat and it is just insane. So, for me that was an eye–opener in terms of why this was an interesting problem.

Sara Louise Muhr: I think that this quite nicely leads over to you, Jana, as you wanted to pick up on the issue of work life balance.

Jana Costas: Yes. First, I think it is important to contextualize extreme work, that is be clear about what kind of extreme work we are talking about. Clearly, there is a split between high- and low-end work, i.e. between investment banking and cleaning work. Moreover, I would be interested in understanding the relations between different kinds of work. So, what are the implications for other workers if professionals work so many hours? For example, I would be interested in how the extreme hours of professionals affect cleaners who for this reason often having to work extreme hours. Why do the cleaners I studied, for example, started working at 5 in the morning? Well, partially because they have to clean offices before people come in to work. Interestingly, this can also lead to strange encounters. I myself have also worked as a consultant and at 3 o'clock at night the only person you suddenly see is a cleaner. In other words, there can be interesting overlaps here. So, I think it's very important to be specific about the people we talk about especially when saying that people are all happy to do this kind of extreme work. Who are the people you are talking about? So, I really think we have to be really careful in how we use notions of extreme work, look at how they play out in different contexts and at the same time see how different worlds of work and their time regimes are connected.

Laura Empson: I was just remembering one night when I was doing an all-nighter in an investment bank years ago and I met the lady who had been cleaning my desk for a very long time. And I never thought about it before except occasionally when she moved something and it annoyed me and I knew somebody must have cleaned my desk. And then that night she talked to me as she cleaned my desk about the three jobs that she was doing, and how she managed to be there at 3 in the morning, why she was doing it and how she was educating her children and the

dreams and ambitions she had for them. And I was reflecting on me and I thought she is so much wiser and healthier and mentally healthier than I am and I felt really, really moved by that encounter. And in the end, I was reflecting on what her motivation was. She's clearly doing it because she has a dream for her next generation. I'm doing it for some dream for me, but it's again about a deferred future. And are we doing it as extreme workers for the excitement of the moment or are we always, always imagining a time in the future where we will be happy.

Sara Louise Muhr: Yes, absolutely, they are directly linked…

Jana Costas: Directly linked in relation to a deferred future. That's exactly what Chris Grey and I wrote about in the piece on the temporality of power [Costas and Grey, 2014]. So, in my studies of consulting I would be very critical of people happily doing the work. A lot of the consultants I met did not happily do the work. A lot of them left. And a lot of my students don't want to enter consultancy firms anymore. So, let's just not make it seem like that these people just love working all the time. We have not spoken much about the resistance to time regimes. Where is all that? Because people also pretend to be working long hours. There are all these columns and columns of showing how people at night purposefully keep the (code on) making it seem like that they're still in the office, whereas they had left hours ago. So, let's be very careful in this in terms of deferred future. Yes, I think there is extreme work and sometimes it is actually the way to keep the high kind of lifestyle up. But there are enough examples of people forcefully having to leave the system because their bodies break down. Or at some point people actually say 'you know what, I want to open a cafe or become a yoga teacher somewhere'. There is this whole new movement in that direction, so I would be much more careful.

Laura Empson: So, one guy – Martin from Sara's research or Mike from my research – might be fully fulfilled by the work and delighted to have an excuse to not go home to an unhappy marriage and annoying children. But he will be sitting at a desk next to someone else who is bored and disillusioned and longing to be at home. But because Mike is staying at the desk, this other person has to stay there too. I think we really need to be careful not to focus on one or the

other, and keep looking at the interaction them both – how we undermine each other through our interactions, sometimes accidentally and sometimes deliberately.

Susanne Ekman: I have numerous examples of what we were talking about before. Examples of people whose managers actually attempt to protect them in the sense of: 'how about introducing some routines?' But they resist the idea of managerial protection, because they regard it as a prerogative to be working without somebody telling them how to do it. So, it's an extremely complex phenomenon. I read this ethnography by Karen Ho on Wall Street bankers [Ho, 2009], and what struck me about this whole regime was the way that they were caught in it. It's a combination of extreme seduction and extreme anxiety at the same time. You are picked out, and you are part of the 'special Harvard family'. They recruit only from Harvard, and it is seen as a given that you are a 'big talent'. It is allegedly not something that can be learnt, which makes you feel special. But you are constantly afraid that you will be among those who are not moved on to the next level. Then you are asked to do very extreme hours, and at some point – two, three, four years down the road – you have sacrificed so much for this life that it is no longer bearable to recognize that it was not worth it. At this point, the people have lost their girlfriends and boyfriends, they have lost their social circle, and all they have left is a fantasy about how it will pay off eventually. There is something self-reinforcing in this fantasy, because you cannot bear to cut your losses. It leads me back to how important the seduction element is; the combination of seduction and anxiety, which is premised on the extreme individualism that we all have bought into. It is so difficult for all of us to conceive rewards in terms of collective modes.

Sara Louise Muhr: I think actually I would pick up on that and ask a question to all of you but maybe to you particularly Laura, about insecurity, especially in light of how Susanne mentioned anxiety and seduction. Would you reflect on the link to insecurity?

Laura Empson: I think in order to understand the nature of insecurity within an individual, it is very important to recognize that the thrill that we have in learning brings with it a perpetual

anxiety of not knowing. And then if you put that into an organizational context where the penalties for not knowing can be dismissal – in an up or out environment that potentially is quite pernicious. So, I was looking at the ways in which these firms engage in uncertainty amplification, to take that inherent insecurity and make it worse.

But getting back to the comment I was making at the beginning, it also about understanding the individual reasons for that insecurity, the insecurity that the individual brings into the working environment, which is then exploited by organization – it goes back deep. My book chapter on insecure-overachievers and the comforts of social control was read recently by someone who was the editor of major British quality newspaper. When I met up with him, he said 'I read it last night. Oh my god, you know, oh my god'. And I was like, 'what exactly did it do for you?' and he said 'I now understand something that never made sense to me'. And he started telling me a story of his mother. He is in his 60s and is Jewish, and he started telling me about his mother's experience of when the Gestapo came to their house in Berlin and how his family were thrown out. 'It was', he said 'when I read your chapter I suddenly could understand something, which never made sense to me about how I had lived my life. And it goes right back to my mother's experiences as a child in Berlin in 1938', he said, 'Now, I'm in pieces'. This just brought me back to thinking that these things go very, very deep and we can only begin to imagine what is making us vulnerable to what organizations are doing to us and why we conspire in that.

Because we're not simply victims of it, we recreate it, and we also impose it on others. So suddenly in reading my book chapter about insecurity and overwork this man went back to a really profound, visceral and physical insecurity that he has carried with him all his life, because of his mother's childhood experiences.

Jana Costas: I think it's important to situate the individual within the context. And when I mean context it is the institutional, the technological, the occupational, the organizational along with the cultural, social and economic context. So, my approach would not be to mainly focus on the individual as such, but rather on the individual in his/her specific context. This is also important when making claims regarding the newness of our era today. Indeed, is it all historically new what we observe today? Probably, the answer depends on the time period you take as a point of comparison.

Susanne Ekman: I would like to take up institutional or organizational aspects of insecurity. If we look at the welfare professions in Denmark right now, the work intensification they are witnessing means that there is a fundamental reshaping of what professionalism means. Earlier, we were talking about what it means to be a good nurse. What does it mean to be a good teacher? It is shifting away from long, in-depth training towards a broader, fragmented education combining a few practical skills with some superficial academic knowledge about, say, late modern society – even if you are training to become a nurse. The professional ideals are in constant flux. This means that the professionalism, which you could base your sense of security or confidence on, is increasingly eroding. We have a Danish scholar who looks at what this means for professionals' ability to voice critique. He concludes that when professionals lose their sense of solid professionalism, they are no longer able to voice critique, because they do not know what it means to be competent anymore. Instead, they are increasingly dependent on bullshitting or on some kind of pretense in order to manage their job. That is not very conducive for a sense of security.

Dan Kärreman: My take on this is, that security is obviously something that might seem like an individual issue, but I do think that it is interesting to also consider that what we see as personal insecurities are increasingly becoming a resource of management basically as a way to discipline the workforce. So, I think we tend to attach individual feelings around a sense of insecurity but I think the more interesting question or the more interesting phenomenon is how it is used socially – or for social control.

Susanne Ekman: Well, I also think that we should also see this in a larger context of international capitalism. And what we have witnessed over the last decades is that the dynamics of competition increasingly dictate that the way companies gain their advantage is through saving on labour cost. If your competitive advantage is premised on intensifying labour in some form, it is evident that we will be witnessing extreme forms of work. And it is evident that we will be witnessing a self-reinforcing polarization like you said, Jana: certain kinds of white collar

workers are exploited, but at the same time they actually do reap a number of benefits. And in order for this kind of wild bubble work to be possible, we have a set of workers who are exploited. It is not just the cleaning workers but also people within the white collar or knowledge work sector. They are split into elite and precariat, so you have the developers, and out-of-the-box thinkers, and innovators, and entrepreneurs who are the winners, and then you have whole army of routine workers. And they are necessary to sustain this bubble activity that the entrepreneurs are undertaking. But these knowledge workers undertaking routine assignments are increasingly hired as casual labor or do not get the same kind of employability from their work. So, they are systematically losing in the game in order to facilitate the kind of wins that entrepreneurs get. Yes, we need to reflect on the larger system of competition that is driving this. I believe that it will increase henceforth. I am reading a book on platform capitalism, and it is pretty scary reading, I have to tell you. This guy thinks that this is the future – this is how the future business model will be. The thing about platform tendency is that it has an extreme monopoly dynamic built into it, which would make the conditions for intensifying and exploiting labour just explode. So, I think we need a whole new paradigm for how we think the relation between labor and state, and labor and employers.

Jana Costas: I think I would be very careful about saying that we necessarily have more competition now and that things have changed.

Susanne Ekman: I didn't say more competition. I said it is a different set of parameters dictating competition.

Jana Costas: OK, but I still want to stress that we need to be careful of thinking that everything is getting worse. Let's look at exactly where and how and what we to do. For example, we do have a rise of self-employed people with short-term contracts and so forth. At the same time, in Germany a minimum wage has been re-introduced. And I want to give an example that Chris Grey once used. He read out a quote, which he adapted a little bit, and asked people whether they believe it accurately describes what is going on today to which everybody said yes:

‘Businesses cannot survive without constantly revolutionizing both the technologies they use and the way people work which of course (impacts) all of society. In the past, businesses were very much about stability doing the same old things in the same old ways. The modern world is distinguished by constant change and uncertainty fixed ways of doing things based on habit of prejudice are being swept away new ways of doing things change again even before they become routine all fast frozen relation with their train of ancient variable prejudice and opinions are swept away all new formed ones become antiquated before they can (solidify). All the solids melt into the air all that is Holy is profane and man is at last compelled to (face sober senses) his real conditions of life in his relations with his kind’.

Now Chris Grey actually adapted this quote from the Communist Manifesto published in 1848. And when we think about the first part, about revolutionizing, how everything is changing, we have the same rhetoric today. Pick up any of the books you find at the airport and I bet the point is a similar one.

Susanne Ekman: But it is a very real thing that there is a giant change going on.

Jana Costas: I’m not saying it’s not. This brings me to another point I wanted to make. Precisely because we hear the constant claims that things are becoming faster, and that we live in a New Era, we also feel that things are speeding up. Because what is speed? Speed is a qualitative experience. I feel that something is very fast when a lot of activities are happening. So we have to link the notion of extreme work to speed and so far I think there is too much focus on clock time. However, speed is also a question of the temporal frames that we are working with. The experience of speed and change has also something to do with the ways in which we relate to the future: namely, from a short-term perspective. The prevalent understanding of the future is an immediate one, that changes the whole time; it is not a future far away from now, and one we slowly work towards. So, I would like to think about extreme work in relation to time and speed. And it doesn’t mean that they’re not real changes, but I think we should look at them from a cultural perspective. Let’s look at how discursively time has been constructed and how this in

turn influences how people experience it. That doesn't mean that people can't feel insecurity; the point is to see how this is tied to a more general construction of our times.

Susanne Ekman: But I think that one of the key issues is that we keep focusing on productivity. This is the only button we know how to push. Maybe we have reached a point in time where prioritization – which is really not as strong suit in the whole neoliberal regime – is more important than increased productivity?

Laura Empson: I'm increasingly becoming frustrated by the discussion as I think we are focusing too much on the detailed and complex debate we have amongst ourselves. I think we need to start to communicate the issues and our ideas to the outside world. We are all really, I hope, contemptuous of the reductionist and banal approach that we see replicated in every management book sold in airports. But the point is that they're *sold*, because they're fulfilling people's need to make sense of the world they are experiencing. And they are written by people with the hope of making money. And the reason they make so much money is that people want to buy their books. I think our responsibility as academics is to embrace the complexity, to understand the complexity, to dimensionalize the complexity, and then to find a way to translating that complexity to a broader audience. Because if we don't do that we'll leave the terrain free for the people who just want to go out there and make a quick buck off writing an airport book. And we can sit in the small rooms like this one to debate these issues and feel superior to the people out there who don't really understand what's going on. But what we have seen in the UK, what we have seen in the US, is what happens when experts fail to engage and fail to convince people out there. And when we fail them they will grab the explanation that they can understand – even if it's wrong – and vote for Brexit and Trump. So, I would just say, 'let's keep trying to find a way to understand this complexity and then to explain this complexity, by integrating all these perspectives rather than defending our own particular positions', because then we will be just be the worst kind of ivory tower academics. And I think we're better than that.

Sara Louise Muhr: And with that in mind, lets open for questions from the audience?

Audience member: It seems like a downward spiral and I want to ask if it is one? And how can we turn it around or should we give up? Or as Laura said, should we educate people to understand the world better and make it a better world for instance in my university of course, it's everywhere. Careers in academia become more insecure and precarious more competitive more international more, more, more. Does it really get worse all the time that is it like a natural thing going on here?

Jana Costas: I first want to make a couple of things clear. I didn't say that nothing is changing the whole time, I said we have to really be careful about claims regarding newness and be more specific here. So, is everything becoming worse? No, I think such a general statement would be a wrong depiction – even in academia people have really benefited from this new system. So, I don't think one can necessarily say that everything is getting worse. For example, the internationalization of academia is also something good. The fact that we at this conference in Austria speak in English as well as have such a diversified group of people here may have not happened 30 years ago.

Laura Empson: I would like to think of this for a moment in the context of British history. If you think of the Industrial Revolution, think of incredibly dramatic and terrifying changes that happened in a very short space of time. People moved away from the land into the town and experienced a kind of suffering that was previously inconceivable. So, they were no longer at risk of being trampled to death by their cows, but they were dying in droves because of overcrowding and industrial related diseases. But nevertheless, in parallel with this was the immense optimism of the Victorian era. If it had been possible to measure back then, we would find that optimism probably peaked in 1851, with the launch of the Great Exhibition, when Victorians genuinely believed that they ruled the world, and things were becoming better and

better, and technology was the solution to everything, and the future was going to be amazing. Then during World War One people for the first time really truly understood the terrible dangers associated with technological advancements, how it makes it possible to slaughter people on an industrial scale. I had to choose if I could live in any time I would choose Victorian era, to be a middle class Victorian male taking my children on an outing to Great Exhibition in1851. And the very worst person would be a man who had served in the trenches during World War One, had lived through the Great Depression, and then had to send his son to die in World War Two. And I think a lot of what is happening right now is we're just having another 'oh fuck what have we done' and we are going to have a few decades of that until things start to shift. That will probably make some things better and some things worse. But in the midst of all of this I would say – since I am a woman and not a mid-Victorian male – I'm completely happy as a woman that my life has gotten better with each generation. At least I'm not going to die in childbirth! Let's be positive about that we're not dead yet.

Audience member: What is our responsibility as educators?

Susanne Ekman: It is one thing what our responsibility is. It is another thing what our conditions for living up to it are. Because – at least in the Danish system – we have had endless reforms that push the students so they are in a constant sense of hurry and increasingly being tested and in competition. On top of that they are expected to have a full time job next to their studies and network and blah blah blah. Our universities are subject to government quality control, and they would not receive their 'accreditation', that is, they would not get approved as educational institutions unless we push them like this. So, we do not have any leeway for doing it differently.

Jana Costas: Well I am more optimistic. I do teach students coming from a cross-section of society. Some come from migrant families, and they are the first ones to go to university. And I don't teach them in a different way than I would teach upper class kids. Why should I? My aim to teach people to think critically does not change depending on the students I have in front of

me. Of course, the examples I might use in class may be different, but in terms of education I wouldn't say one has to completely change one's aims and approach. Yes, of course, the students feel to be under pressure to finish all the courses and have a career, and we are under pressure too (for example, to acquire third-party funding or have the right publications). But nevertheless, I do spend with some people three hours and four hours per week. It's actually a long time.

Audience member: Should we think more about individuals? But if we do don't we put the individual in a very strange position? On one hand as a victim of the system, but at the same time we also see the individual is the source for change. And if the individuals are so easily becoming seduced by the system and they internalize all this and their insecurities drive them to work this long hours and so on and so forth, is it really a viable way to induce change. So should we work at the individual level or at something else?

Laura: I don't think it is for us to work on the individual. It's for the individual to have a degree of insight, which gives them an opportunity to work upon themselves. We operate at a very different level, but this is just about helping individuals to understand what's going on, not just out there but inside as well.

Susanne Ekman: Yes, and then to the extent that we work on the individual, it might be for them to be able to conceive of collective action. They're just not receptive to it. They do not understand it. There are at least two generations who do not understand what collective protection means, because they experience it as being robbed of entitlement and rights. So, before we can successfully manage something at a structural level, we at least need a resocialization, where we can imagine that despite certain losses of individual possibilities, the gains of something collective can be bigger.

Dan Kärreman: I'm happy to work on the individual – if I would have the same resources as corporations. And I think one reason for why we end up with these sorts of dysfunctions: there are people who benefit from it and they tend to make a point that increasing part of surplus is

basically going to the owners of the system. And they benefit from the system because they actually have the resources to brand markets. Jana and I we did a paper on why knowledge workers are also bored. One reason is that because they are completely bombarded with messages with how great it is to work in a consultancy firm. If I have the resources to say no basically to have the resources to do a counter campaign I would love to work on the level of individual but I don't think that levelling of the field is possible, so I do think that we need to work in other ways.

Audience member: Susanne referred to the issue of exploitation of the lower wage workers, but all of workers are exploited from Marxian philosophy. The question is, are we really in a situation where we can analyze the nature of daily dynamics in our society with Marxian Theory categories, which was developed in 1900s?

Susanne Ekman: Well, I'm not a Marxist. But I do think some of the high tech platform dynamics I am talking about have inherent monopolistic tendencies. They survive on expanding networks of users and extracting data, which gives them a monopolistic drive. They also survive on delivering the standard system that everybody else uses as an infrastructure, which makes it attractive to push out other standard systems – another monopolistic drive. And they are hoarding giant sums of money. So, I do think that in this respect the vocabulary is relevant and it is scary that it is becoming relevant to that extent right now.

Sara Louise Muhr: And with this timely remark, I would like to say thank you to everyone for an extremely interesting discussion. Thank you to our panelists and thank you to the audience for engaging with such relevant and interesting questions.

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